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SUBJECT: Senegal: Campaigning for the 2012 is Already Underway

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Although presidential elections are not slated until February 2012, the ruling Democratic Party of Senegal (PDS) and the opposition Benno coalition (unity in Wolof) continue to spar against one another while internal debates rage as to who will represent them in the election. President Abdoulaye Wade's plan to have his son Karim succeed him is not popular among the Senegalese, a fact that led him to announce that he will run in 2012 (at the age of 86) for a seven-year term. This comes amid rumors of yet another constitutional amendment in the works - this time aimed at eliminating a second round runoff - thus increasing the chances of Wade being reelected. End Summary.

Call for political dialogue

¶2. (SBU) Most of Senegal's leading opposition parties are not represented in the National Assembly after they boycotted the 2007 legislative elections. Following those elections, the opposition called for a political dialogue to address the electoral law and to reform voter registration. Until the PDS lost big in recent local elections, Wade had continually refused this call, saying that he would not bail out an opposition that was paying for bad political choices. However, now a new paradigm exists whereby political dialogue is less urgent for the opposition but more so for Wade.

Out Come the Skeletons

¶3. (SBU) In July, the opposition demanded that Wade include in any agenda of dialogue a discussion of the assassination of Judge Seye in 1993. At the time Wade was accused of being its instigator, a rumor that gained traction when he pardoned all the perpetrators who were jailed in the case after winning the Presidency in 2000. Wade's response to this request left the opposition astounded. He accused the Socialist Party, who had ruled the country from 1960 to 2000, of being behind the assassination of Police Chief Sadibou Ndiaye in 1989 and the mysterious deaths of two young female albinos whose disappearance was never clarified. He threatened to reveal more if the opposition continued down this path. The opposition duly dropped the matter and, in a letter dated October 8, they proposed nine points of discussion for a dialogue. These included: urgent social issues, the electoral system, the Casamance crisis, public finances, political and institutional governance, liberties and the rule of law, the business environment and employment. President Wade accepted all nine points, even though he had initially refused to discuss electoral and human rights issues, arguing that the electoral system was good enough to allow the opposition to win local elections and that Senegal's election to the United Nations Human Rights Council underlined his government's positive track record. However, his acceptance came with preconditions. He demanded that the issues of public finance be discussed with government ministers live on camera in the presence of religious leaders and diplomats. The opposition rejected these preconditions and the process is now at a standstill.

Wade Unites his Satraps

¶4. (SBU) Wade's most recent political strategy aims to reduce dissent in his coalition. By appointing senior dissident leader Aminata Tall to a top position in the cabinet and negotiating with his former Prime Minister Idrissa Seck, who is rumored to be making a comeback to reenergize the PDS, Wade is hoping to create a grand presidential coalition that will once again carry him to power. However, the reality is that this strategy is fragile, as popular former Prime Minister Macky Sall is opposed to returning to Wade's coalition and Idrissa Seck and Karim Wade detest one another.

The President is cornered, but...

¶5. (SBU) President Wade is in a difficult political situation as his old age, the rejection of his son by the Senegalese people, and the fact that he has black widow-like eliminated all potential young leaders who could succeed him have left him cornered. Meanwhile, as most Senegalese struggle to make ends meet and have lost hope in the face of massive unemployment, Wade and his entourage are engulfed in financial scandals. A couple of weeks after his attempt to bribe former IMF Resrep Alex Segura, Wade had CFA 52 million stolen from his apartment in Paris by a member of his entourage. A close relative of Wade told Embassy that this is not the first time the President has been a victim of such theft.

¶6. (SBU) However, the opposition remains paralyzed and has so far failed to capitalize on recent PDS setbacks because no decision has been made as to whether Benno will unite behind one candidate or whether they will respect the charter of good governance that they signed in May 2009 following a National Dialogue. This dialogue envisioned a transition government to reform the political system

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from a presidential to a parliamentarian one.

Views of opposition leaders

¶7. (SBU) Ibrahima Sene, Deputy Leader of the Party of Independence and Labor (PIT), told Poloff that his party will stick to the conclusions of the National Dialogue. He supports a short transition period of twelve to eighteen months, during which time a new constitution and electoral law would be voted in and a parliamentary regime introduced. For his part former Prime Minister Moustapha Niasse, the leader of AFP who is 72, wishes to be the candidate of Benno but faces strong opposition from the Socialist Party. Niasse is a rich and well-known politician who financially and politically contributed to Wade's victory in 2000. For Niasse, this is his last chance to be President as he nears the end of his political career. He denied to PolCouns rumors that he was solely focused on being the candidate of Benno, adding that he supports a serious debate on institutional reforms and the nature of Senegal's political system. He "is open to all possibilities" as long as the goal of Benno remains to remove Wade from power.

¶8. (SBU) Ousmane Tanor Dieng, the leader of the Socialist Party, told PolCouns he was against a transition and that the Benno candidate should be determined by primaries. It is not clear that Benno has the required organization or even desire to go to primaries given the large number of small party leaders who would lose their influence in such a selection process. However, Tanor confessed that if Wade eliminates the second round runoff, they will have no other choice but to agree on one candidate. Talla Sylla, the fiery young leader of Jeuf Jeul, indicated that there is a consensus being formed around Niasse as the candidate and he predicted that Tanor will be isolated if he persists with the idea of holding primaries. Macky Sall, the leader of APR/Yakaar, a party he created after Wade removed him as Chairman of the National Assembly, told Poloff that he neither believed in changing the current system nor in Benno having one candidate. He then boldly declared himself ready to run against Wade adding that both Niasse and Tanor are "outdated."

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Over the last thirty years Wade has proved to be a

savvy politician who has always managed to turn around the most difficult of situations. But his defeat in the local elections of March 2009 is a clear indication that the voters are tired and have grown weary of Wade's increasingly aloof administration. Now the challenge is for Benno to unite and clearly articulate their vision for political, economic, and institutional reforms. However, of greater worry is what would happen in the event that Wade dies before designating a successor. As it stands, both the PDS and Benno are internally, deeply divided and there are real concerns that neither group is ready to fill the gap in event of Wade's demise, which would likely lead to a period of vicious internecine political fighting in both camps and general instability in the country. End Comment.

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